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“I Am Very Happy Here” *Female Jihad in Syria as Self-Accomplishment*

Thomas Pierret

Lecturer in Contemporary Islam, Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern
Studies (IMES), University of Edinburgh

19 George square, EH8 9LD Edinburgh, United Kingdom

thomas.pierret@gmail.com

Mérim Cheikh

Doctoral Candidate, Groupe d'Etude sur les Relations ethniques,
les Migrations et l'Egalité (GERME), Université Libre de Bruxelles

CP124, avenue F.D. Roosevelt 50, 1050 Bruxelles, Belgium

meriamcheikh@gmail.com

Abstract

In October 2014, a 19-year female Syrian tweeter known as Ahlam al-Nasr announced her departure from her home in Saudi Arabia and settlement in the territories held by the Islamic State Organisation (ISO). As a piece of propaganda, Ahlam's account of this jihadi migration tells as much about the author's personality as about the kind of subjectivities ISO is trying to appeal to. Ahlam appears as a strongly individualist figure as she forcefully asserts ownership of her life plan despite the fact that it was decided with her family's consent. The reasons she give to account for her migration, and to encourage her readers to follow suit, also testify to an individualist break with previous rationales for transnational jihad: jihad in Syria is not about helping coreligionist in distress, but rather about participating in the edification of an ideal Islamic State that offers attractive opportunities of self-accomplishment.

Keywords

Islamic State Organisation – women – jihadism – Islamic movements – Syria – foreign fighters

Introduction

In October 2014, supporters and observers of the Islamic State Organisation (ISO) were in excitement when the widely followed pro-ISO female blogger and tweeter known as “Ahlam al-Nasr the Damascene” announced her arrival in Raqqa (ISO’s main urban stronghold in northern Syria) and subsequent marriage with prominent Austrian Jihadi figure Abu Usama al-Gharib.¹ Despite being only 19-year old by the time she moved to Raqqa, Ahlam had acquired online fame as the “poetess of the State of Islam” during the previous months.² In October 2014 as well, Iman al-Bugha, a female Syrian professor of Islamic studies at the Saudi University of Dammam, announced on her Facebook page that she had renounced her “huge salary” in order to head for Raqqa. It was subsequently revealed that al-Bugha was none else than the mother of Ahlam al-Nasr.³

With regard to the phenomenon of transnational Jihadi volunteerism, the cases of Ahlam al-Nasr and Iman al-Bugha exemplify two major developments brought about by the Syrian conflict, and more specifically by ISO’s emergence: first, the presence among foreign volunteers of an unprecedentedly large contingent of women whose migration is experienced as the product of an individual choice rather than as the mere consequence of a decision made by a male relative;⁴ second, the possibility for these female (and male) volunteers to express their views and narrate their experience instantaneously thanks

1 Ahlam al-Nasr’s blog, discontinued in April 2014, was still available at <http://ahlam-alnasr.blogspot.be/> by January 2015. By that time, her Facebook and Twitter accounts had not been reopened after their closure the previous month. Until then, she was rapidly reconstituting a following of several thousands after each closure by the management of the host websites.

2 The first collection of her previously released poems in support of ISO was published in July 2014 by ISO’s media outlet Fursan al-Balagh under the title *Awar al-haqq. Al-diwan al-shi’ri al-awwal li-sha’irat al-jihad al-adibat al-fadila Ahlam al-Nasr* [Flames of Truth. The First Collection of Poems by the Poetess of Jihad, the Noble Writer Ahlam al-Nasr]. Available at <http://en.calameo.com/books/0040147384df26e156cc9>.

3 *Al-Hayat*, 20 and 24 October 2014, <http://alhayat.com/Articles/5161921-أكاديمية-سورية>; <http://alhayat.com/Articles/5237446-شاعرة-ساعرة-تستقبل-من-جامعة-سعودية-لتابع-البغدادي>; <http://alhayat.com/Articles/5237446-شاعرة-ساعرة-تستقبل-من-جامعة-سعودية-لتابع-البغدادي>. This information was confirmed to the authors by a second-degree relative of Ahlam al-Nasr.

4 On the factors behind the unprecedented scale and diversity of the foreign Jihadi contingent in Syria, see Thomas Hegghammer, “Syria’s Foreign Fighters,” *Foreign Policy* (9 December 2013), <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/12/09/syrias-foreign-fighters/>.

to online platforms. The combination of these two developments has given female Jihadis in Syria a discursive presence that has no historical precedent.⁵

This article does not aim to explore the broader blogosphere and Twittersphere of female ISO members and supporters, a task that is made increasingly difficult with the frequent closure of their accounts by the management of the host websites. More modestly, we will focus on the figure of Ahlam al-Nasr, and in particular on the written personal account of her journey to Syria, through which she announced her arrival in Raqqa and subsequent marriage.⁶ This document offers detailed insight into the young woman's background, motivations, worldview, and stance on gender relations. Because of this, we deemed this personal account more interesting for the present study than the content of Ahlam's blog, which essentially consists in poems and in a heated defense of ISO against its enemies, in particular rival Jihadi groups such as al-Qaeda. For the same reason, we preferred Ahlam's travel account to the Facebook posts of her mother Iman al-Bugha, whose writings tend to be determined by their author's status as a Muslim scholar, irrespective of her sex: they mostly contain authoritative opinions, with rare autobiographical elements provided for the sole purpose of bolstering the author's credentials as a religious authority.

It is well-known that religious movements nurturing a conservative conception of gender relations can at the same time provide women with avenues of empowerment. There are two possible ways through which women active in such movements can challenge the patriarchal norms that used to constrain their involvement outside of the private sphere: the first is their mere

5 See for instance Joanna Paraszczuk, "Diary Of An Islamic State Wife: British Woman In Syria Tells Of Husband's Death In Kobani," *Radio Free Europe* (24 November 2014), <http://www.rferl.org/content/islamic-state-wives-syria-uk-blog-kobani/26708088.html>. On other aspects of the use of social media by Jihadi groups active in Syria, see Joseph Carter, Shiraz Maher, and Peter R. Neumann, *#Greenbirds: Measuring Importance and Influence in Syrian Foreign Fighter Networks* (London: ICSR, 2014), <http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/ICSR-Report-Greenbirds-Measuring-Importance-and-Influence-in-Syrian-Foreign-Fighter-Networks.pdf>; Ali Fisher and Nico Prucha, "Eye of the Swarm: The Rise of ISIS and the Media Mujahedeen," *CPD Blog*, 8 July 2014, <http://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/blog/eye-swarm-rise-isis-and-media-mujahedeen>.

6 This account consists in two non-paginated texts, *Akhiran rabbuna kataba l-samaha* [Finally Our Lord Granted Forgiveness], and *Al-irhab: al-hayat al-haqiqiyya* [Terrorism: The Real Life], that were released online by the ISO-affiliated Ghuraba Media Centre on, respectively, 11 and 22 October 2014. By 15 January 2015 they were still available on the Jihadi online forum *Ana l-Muslim*: <http://www.muslim.org/vb/showthread.php?538577-الغرباء-للإعلام-أخيراً-538577>.
رَبَّنَا - كَتَبَ - السَّامَحَا - بِقَلَمٍ - شَاعِرَةٍ - دَوْلَةُ - الْإِسْلَامِ - أَحْلَامُ - النَّصْر

participation in a social movement, which inherently breaks with an exclusively domestic conception of women's role in society; the second one is discursive criticism of patriarchal values in the name of a "truer" understanding of religion, an approach often described, in Muslim contexts, as "Islamic feminism".⁷ These two kinds of challenges are not necessarily combined, since a large proportion of the women who join Islamic movements discursively uphold the patriarchal values they undermine, or at least reshape, in practice.⁸

Surprisingly perhaps, considering that she belongs to a group that promotes one of the most rigorist interpretations of sharia currently known, the stance of Ahlam al-Nasr is the opposite to the latter pattern. Indeed, her engagement in support of ISO poses no practical challenge to patriarchal authority, but it is discursively framed in a way that emphasises the author's individual autonomy against certain patriarchal values. Rather than her deeds, thus, it is the kind of individualist subjectivity she displays in her writings that reflects a form of empowerment.

Ahlam's status as the "poetess of the State of Islam"—a title first granted to her by ISO (male) media officer Mu'awiya al-Qahtani—⁹ is nothing revolutionary from the viewpoint of the Islamic tradition. The blueprint here is the famous al-Khansa', a contemporary of Prophet Muhammad and early convert to Islam known for her elegies of male relatives killed on the battlefield.¹⁰ After her arrival in Raqqa, Ahlam was assigned an utterly "domestic" role by ISO, that is, cooking and cleaning for male fighters.¹¹ Contrary to many other

7 See Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009).

8 For a theoretical discussion of this issue, see Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

9 Foreword to Nasr, *Awar al-haqq*, 11.

10 *Al-Khansa'* was the title of an online magazine for women launched by al-Qaeda members in 2004. See Farhana Ali, "Rocking the Cradle to Rocking the World: The Role of Muslim Female Fighters," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 8 (2006), 29; Katharina Von Knop, "The Female Jihad: Al Qaeda's Women," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30 (2007), 406–7.

11 Being currently involved in conventional warfare rather than in secretive terrorist activities, ISO does not need to entrust its female recruits with the kind of operational role that has been witnessed during the last decade among female militants in Chechnya, Palestine and Iraq (within ISO's own previous avatars, al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia and the Islamic State in Iraq). Beyond tasks such as those performed by Ahlam, female ISO members have been essentially assigned a role in the organisation's media and in its religious police. *Al-Hayat*, 18 November 2014, <http://alhayat.com/Articles/5759079/داعش-يوكّل-النشر-الإعلامي-ل-جيش-من-النساء-والقيادة-يبد-السعوديات>; *Aksalser*, 29 October 2014, http://www.aksalser.com/?page=view_news&id=a3ab50312

female ISO volunteers, she did not even challenge parental authority by moving into Syria,¹² since she did so in company with her father, mother, and seven siblings.¹³ Likewise, although she married outside of her social milieu, this also happened with the consent of her parents.

In spite of this, Ahlam *does* challenge a certain set of patriarchal values in her account in at least three respects. The first one is the very nature of the literary genre she chose to relate her travel to Syria. As will be amply illustrated in the article, the texts studied here are not mere diaries, that is, daily records of events and thoughts: they include elements of autobiography, that is, an attempt at reconstituting the history of the author's personality.¹⁴ Indeed, we will show that Ahlam presents her jihadi career as a wholly coherent personal trajectory, from birth to marriage. Yet, as Michael Mascuch argues, the capacity to produce a unified retrospective autobiographical narrative is the definitive characteristic of individualist self-identity.¹⁵

Such an assertion of individualism by a woman is unusual in Ahlam's ultra-conservative social environment. For sure, her account is not the first text of this kind to be written by a female Islamic activist, the most famous precedent being Zaynab al-Ghazali's *Days of My Life*, published in 1972.¹⁶ However, al-Ghazali's decision to write this book was legitimised by her status as a senior

97a41ba66259fa48ee4bff3. On the operational role of women in militant organisations, see Cindy Ness (ed.), *Female Terrorism and Militancy: Agency, Utility, and Organization* (London: Routledge, 2008); Mia Bloom, *Bombshell: Women and Terrorism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Laura Sjöberg and Caron Gentry, *Women, Gender, and Terrorism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011); Jessica Davis, "Evolution of the Global Jihad: Female Suicide Bombers in Iraq," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36 (2013), 279–91.

- 12 A few days after the announcement of Ahlam's migration to Syria, anti-ISO Jihadi networks (that is, for the most part, al-Qaeda sympathisers) launched a social media campaign under the hashtag "No to the mobilisation of women" (*la li-nafir al-nisa'*) (*Zaman al-Wasl*, 16 October 2014, <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/54424.html>). By criticising the recruitment of young women against parental authority, these networks were actually reproaching ISO for being *too much* egalitarian from a gender perspective, since the same networks see no problem with the fact that young male volunteers disregard parental authority when they join a land of Jihad.
- 13 Ahlam is probably the elder daughter in the family, as suggested by the fact that one of her sisters is sixteen years younger than her (Tweet, 21 November 2014).
- 14 Philippe Lejeune, *L'Autobiographie en France* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2010), 14.
- 15 Michael Mascuch, *Origins of the Individualist Self: Autobiography and Self-identity in England, 1591–1791* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).
- 16 Miriam Cooke, "Zaynab al-Ghazali: Saint or Subversive?," *Die Welt des Islams* 34 (1994), 1–20.

figure within the Egyptian Islamic movement, and as a survivor of Nasser's torture inferno. The credentials of Ahlam al-Nasr, a teenage blogger, do not come close to anything like that. It should be noted, moreover, that al-Ghazali's book did not really create any sort of emulation, as self-narration has remained rare among female Islamic activists. Among Jihadi circles more specifically, female writings produced before the Syrian war (whose actual authorship by women was put into question by some authors) generally consisted in normative statements, particularly on the role of women in jihad.¹⁷

The second way through which Ahlam challenges patriarchal value is by proposing a narrative that is utterly dominated by female characters, that is, herself and her mother (as well as, secondarily, her marriage broker), whereas her father, brothers and new husband feature as mere extra. This feature is certainly determined by idiosyncratic factors such as Ahlam's mother role as the brains of the family and, perhaps, by a reluctance to write about men out of propriety. It remains that the outcome is a narrative where women occupy the frontseats.

Third, Ahlam challenges patriarchal values by emphasising her individual agency in order to demonstrate ownership of decisions she made with her parents' consent, that is, moving to Raqqa, and marrying a Jihadi militant. Conceptualising that stance as "resistance" would be problematic: since her family agreed to her life project, Ahlam had very little to oppose in practice. In her writings she rebukes gender conceptions that assign women an exclusively domestic role, but as the figure of her mother suggests, these are not conceptions she had to confront at home. Against this background, Ahlam's insistence on her autonomy would be more accurately described as an attempt at "reworking and renegotiating connections":¹⁸ she is discursively establishing a more equitable relationship with the figures of patriarchy (her parents, her husband, ISO), whose authority she wants to be seen as freely embracing out of independent moral judgment.

Ahlam's case might not seem particularly representative of the broader contingent of transnational female volunteers in ISO, in particular because she is not a foreigner but a Syrian national. In reality, legal considerations aside, Ahlam's personal experience is in many ways similar to that of "genuinely" for-

17 Laura Sjöberg, "The Terror of Sex: Significations of Al Qaeda Wives," *Journal of Postcolonial Cultures and Societies* 4 (2013), 119; Nelly Lahoud, "The Neglected Sex: The Jihadis' Exclusion of Women From Jihad," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26 (2014), 789–92.

18 Allison Weir, *Identities and Freedom: Feminist Theory Between Power and Connection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 144–45.

eign ISO recruits. When she moved to Raqqa, the young woman did not really return to the homeland: first, because she belongs to a Damascene bourgeoisie that looks upon the Euphrates valley (ISO's stronghold today) as a backward "far west" not worth the visit; second, from her perspective, Ahlam did not move to "the so-called Syria",¹⁹ but to a new homeland—the Caliphate—that happens to be located in a region which, like many Islamists, she usually refers to by using the premodern nomenclature of "Sham"; third, we will see that upon her arrival in Raqqa, al-Nasr did not "reintegrate" Syrian society, but rather joined a community of like-minded foreigners.

More important here is the fact that whatever Ahlam's social profile, her writings are definitely conceived by herself and by ISO's leadership as a propaganda tool aimed at a broad audience of potential (female) recruits. As mentioned above, her travel account was published by an ISO-affiliated online media outlet, and it features several calls on the reader to head for the land of the Caliphate. The arguments Ahlam uses to support that call are informative of the subjectivities ISO is trying to appeal to, notably by hinting at incentives. In her travel account, Jihad in Syria is not about helping Syrians suffering at the hands of the Asad regime: it is rather about becoming, to use an expression borrowed from both Ahlam's text and *Titanic's* famous scene, the "king (s) of the world".²⁰ This means living one's strict observance of Islam in absolute freedom, participating in the establishment of a brand new state perceived as integrally Islamic, exerting quasi-colonial authority over a local population seen as in need of religious edification, and possibly, marrying at an earlier age than what one would reasonably expect in one's homeland.

In the first section of the article, we present Ahlam's family background by focusing in particular on the figure of her mother. The second section concerns the role of Ahlam in her family's decision to leave Dammam for Raqqa. The third one addresses the motivations of Ahlam and her relatives, that is, the nature of the struggle that pushes them to migrate to the "land of the Caliphate". In the fourth section we study the idealized vision of the Islamic State proposed by Ahlam. In the fifth and last section, we analyse her marriage in terms of ethics, that is, the moral principles that preside over the conclusion of that union, and politics, that is, the significance of the marriage for ISO and its propaganda.

19 Nasr, *Al-irhab*.

20 Nasr, *Akhiran rabbuna kataba*.

Family Background

Ahlam al-Nasr, which in Arabic means “dreams of victory”, is the keyboard name of Shayma’ al-Haddad.²¹ Although the use of a pseudonym was probably motivated by the risks associated with posting pro-ISO contents online from Saudi Arabia, Ahlam did not disclose her real name after her arrival to Raqqa and kept on signing her writings with the name under which she rose to fame.

Ahlam did not give any details about the identity of her parents either, as she merely mentioned the fact that they were well-off Damascene expatriates living in one of the Gulf monarchies. In spite of that, we know that she stems from a prestigious family of religious scholars. Her father is Tawfiq al-Haddad, a pharmacist and a reputed Quran memoriser.²² As already mentioned, her mother is Iman al-Bugha, a professor of *usul al-fiqh* (sources of jurisprudence) and Islamic economics at the University of Dammam.

Iman’s father and Ahlam’s grandfather is Mustafa Dib al-Bugha (b. 1938), one of Syria’s most prominent religious scholars. The son of the trustee of the butchers of Damascus, al-Bugha taught at the Sharia Faculty at the University of Damascus during the 1980s and 1990s, before he was recruited by Qatari and Jordanian universities. In 2006, he returned to Syria to occupy what was reportedly the best paid teaching position of the country at the private al-Fath Institute. He also started preaching at the Zayn al-‘Abidin mosque, one of the largest of his native neighbourhood of al-Midan. In theory, Mustafa al-Bugha’s pedigree provided for uneasy relations with the regime: his master was Sheikh Hasan Habannaka (d. 1978), who led the ulama’s opposition to the Ba’th in the 1960s, and by the late 1970s, al-Bugha was presiding over the al-Ghawass mosque, a notorious hotbed of militant Islamism. Thirty years later, however, the scholar had been coopted by the regime: he was one of the very rare ulama to be paid the honour of a personal visit by President Bashar al-Asad, and one of the members of the dormant, yet exclusive Higher Council for Ifta’ (fatwa giving). His sons—Iman’s brothers—had moved even closer to the regime:

21 We obtained her real name through one of her second-degree relatives (Skype conversation, 10 January 2015). It is under that name that she published her first collection of poems, *The Epic Battle of Gaza (Malhama Ghazza)* at the Saudi Dar al-Kifah in 2010, that is, at the age of 15. See Shayma’ al-Haddad, “*Hawla diwan malhama Ghazza* [About the poem collection *The Epic Battle of Gaza*]”, *Rabita Udaba’ al-Sham*, 2 October 2010, <http://www.odabasham.net/show.php?sid=39312>.

22 We obtained this information from the aforementioned relative. Haddad is a *hafiz jami’*, that is, someone who has memorised the ten different readings (methods of recitation) of the Quran. Before his departure for Syria, Tawfiq al-Haddad was teaching Quran recitation across Saudi Arabia.

Hasan, who was appointed in 2007 as the Dean of the Faculty of Sharia, was widely criticised for implementing reforms reportedly inspired by the security apparatus, and his brother Anas made an unsuccessful attempt at being elected in the country's rump parliament.²³

During the first year that followed the 2011 uprising, al-Bugha remained quiet, which owed him to feature on a "list of shame" circulated by opposition activists on the internet. However, when state repression turned into all-out war with the bombardment of Homs in February 2012, the scholar shamed the regime in his sermons,²⁴ as a result of which he and his son Anas were assaulted in the street by pro-regime thugs.²⁵ By that time, his mosque was one of the last in central Damascus to witness weekly demonstrations. In the following months, as war and repression intensified, al-Bugha retreated into silence once again.

Contrary to her relatively quiescent father, and thanks to her politically more permissive Saudi environment, al-Bugha's daughter Iman had been known for several years as a passionate proponent of Jihadi ideology within private female Islamic circles in the Kingdom's Eastern region.²⁶ As she put it after her migration to Raqqa, "I was a Daeshite in thought and method."²⁷ I was a Daeshite before Daesh was there. I have known for a long time that the only solution for Muslims is jihad."²⁸

Although in her own posts and tweets Iman al-Bugha never mentions her famous father, she does emphasise her religious training among the disciples of Hasan Habannaka. This is a way for her to claim that her radical views, such as the practice of *takfir* (excommunication),²⁹ are rooted in the

23 Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 38–39, 45, 87, 101, 153.

24 Mustafa Dib al-Bugha, "Huquq al-muslimin wa bayan a'zam al-dhunub al-mawbiqa bi-sahibiha wa minha hatk al-'ird wal-nafs [The Muslims' rights: Expounding the most perilous sins for those who commit them, including sexual assault and murder]", *Youtube*, 2 January 2014 (pronounced in early 2012), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-MrY43nkPJc>.

25 Anas Mustafa al-Bugha, Facebook post, 30 April 2012.

26 *Al-Hayat*, 20 October 2014.

27 "Daesh" is the acronym for ISO's official Arabic name between April 2013 and June 2014 (*al-dawlat al-islamiyya fi-l-'iraq wal-sham*). It was used in a derogatory way by ISO's opponents, and as such, rejected by the organisation itself. Its use by al-Bugha is an example of a stigma being turned into a source of pride.

28 Iman al-Bugha, (untitled article), 20 October 2014, <http://justpaste.it/hn30>.

29 Tweet, 1 December 2014.

mainstream Damascene Islamic tradition and do not result from the influence of Wahhabism, a suggestion she forcefully denies.³⁰

Far from a recent conversion, thus, the Jihadi stance of Iman al-Bugha's daughter Ahlam is rooted in a long exposure to such ideas within her family environment. As Ahlam puts it, "my parents follow the (Jihadi) precepts (*al-ahl 'ala l-manhaj*)".³¹ Before 2014, however, this ideological orientation did not translate into any actual involvement in militant activities beyond Iman al-Bugha's preaching. For the rest, the family's "Jihadism" manifested itself in some form of ethical consumerism, and more particularly in the—often impractical—avoidance of Western-made products:

One of my brothers, when he was a child, was passionate about car toys. . . . He found the car toy of his dreams in a shop, but—following in this the family's habit when buying something—he first checked out the country where the toy was made, and he discovered that it was the United States! He did not hesitate, and put the car back on its shelf, claiming he would not buy it, even for a cheap price . . . I had not thought he would give up on the toy so easily, and that I would not be forced to convince him to do so. . . . When we were forced to buy some foreign appliance, there was an atmosphere of mourning at home, and our mother was trying to comfort us by insisting that this appliance was "necessary" rather than superfluous, that it was saving us time we could use to study religion and serve Islam. Only then would we settle down, while handling the appliance with utmost care in order not to have to replace it.³²

In this anecdote as in the rest of the text, the mother, Iman, is portrayed as the brains of the family: in this case, she is the one who, having promoted anti-Americanism among her children, finds herself forced to adjust it to frustrating practical realities. Independently of the nature of Iman's ideas, the female role-model she represents is important to understand the constitution of Ahlam's own subjectivity: it is natural for her that a woman holds a university degree, works outside of her home, and expresses political views. This is something one must keep in mind in order to avoid misinterpreting Ahlam's assertion of autonomy as a break with "tradition": it is more accurately described as the product of a century of women's empowerment in the region through education and non-domestic work. This applies also, and sometimes primarily, to

30 Facebook post, 7 November 2014.

31 Nasr, *Al-irhab*.

32 Ibid.

conservative countries like Saudi Arabia. In the latter, indeed, gender segregation, notably in higher education, has provided women from relatively privileged social classes with career opportunities that might not necessarily exist elsewhere: in Syria, for instance, where universities are not segregated, women in the country's Sharia faculties are still to occupy professorial positions similar to the one held by Iman al-Bugha.³³

Longing for the Caliphate

O God these are my heart's sighs
 They give me sleepless nights
 When, O God, will you do me that honour?
 When, O God, will you grant me forgiveness?
 My happiness is a pen and a sword
 So that the years of my life resuscitate through struggle
 This will remain my dearest wish
 Even if I was given the greatest honours and success
 And this will remain my obsession as long as I live:
 When will my hand clasp a weapon?³⁴

This excerpt from a poem Ahlam wrote before her migration to Syria opens the first section of her travel account, thereby setting the stage for her narration. As soon as the re-establishment of the Caliphate was announced by ISO in June 2014, she tried to leave for Syria in company with one of her brothers, but the failure of that first attempt plunged her in a state of despair:

I was feeling a pain of a kind I had never known . . . The Islamic Caliphate was the dream of my life since the dawn of my childhood, but my only share of it were social media accounts that were closed down from time to time. . . . The situation of the one who is far from the Caliphate and impatient for it is like the situation of a fish hanging by the tail just above the surface of the sea, seeing it but unable to reach it. . . . O Lord, have mercy on me!³⁵

33 On gender segregation (notably in higher education) in Saudi Arabia, see Amélie Le Renard, *A Society of Young Women: Opportunities of Place, Power, and Reform in Saudi Arabia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

34 Ahlam al-Nasr, "Zafra [Sigh]," in *Awar al-haqq*, 43.

35 Nasr, *Akhiran rabbuna kataba*.

In order to appease the Almighty, Ahlam decided for an increase in religious observance, “abandoning even the smallest sin . . . and multiplying virtuous actions”. Daily charity and night prayer, in particular, played a major role in “making things easier”, that is, in convincing God to open the gates of the Caliphate for her.³⁶ From the very first pages of her account, thus, Ahlam’s departure is presented as a distinctly individual project: one she has nurtured all of her life, one she has been longing and suffering for, and one she eventually helped turn into reality through her virtuousness.

We do not know if Ahlam’s parents were aware of her first attempt at traveling to Syria. Although they had infused the family with the love of jihad, Ahlam acknowledges, they were reluctant to move to the land of the Caliphate out of fear for their children, with the result that the latter threatened to flee the household:

At home, we were no longer discussing anything else than migration to Syria, jihad, and the Caliphate, days and night, all the time, every minute. My siblings and I were insisting all the time: “Please, let us migrate with your consent, so that we don’t have to escape; because we have decided to do our duty as Muslims”.³⁷

Ahlam takes personal credit for eventually succeeding in changing the mind of her parents: “They were convinced, thanks God, and since I felt responsible for that, I proposed to travel with my father first (something my parents accepted with difficulty), in order to prepare the arrival of the rest of the family”.³⁸ Still, on the eve of the departure, an incident provoked by Iman al-Bugha’s irrepressible motherly feelings provided her daughter with the opportunity to emphasise both her ideological debt to her mother, and her own appropriation of that legacy as an autonomous subject:

When the long-awaited night arrived, my mother was walking back and forth in front of my room. I was faking sleep, because I did not want to see her cry, neither did I want to change my plans for any reason. . . . But my mother broke into my room and came to me. She was crying . . . expressing her fears, and invoking God for me. I had to bite my lips to avoid crying myself. Then I told her, while rubbing her head: “Whatever you forgot, I won’t forget what you told me once, mother, do you remember? You told

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

me that when you held me in your arms for the first time after I came to this world, you said: 'This child will serve Islam'. I want to serve it for real. For what purpose did you raise me?! What is that thing you were glorifying and in the love of which I grew up? Jihad! The Caliphate! Islamic rule! It is our collective duty!"

In the passage above, it appears that the legacy of Ahlam's mother is not only a matter of education, but also one of dedication at birth. What is interesting here, apart from the fact that Ahlam manages to reassert her agency *despite* this dedication, is the purely feminine character of Jihadi filiation in the family, as mother and daughter are presented as the chief transmitter and recipient of this ideological heritage: it is the mother who dedicates her child to the cause of Islam, and it is implied that she specifically did so with her ("this child").

Enemies and Motivations

For decades, militant Islamists have been concerned with two main categories of enemies coined by Egyptian ideologue 'Abd al-Salam Farag (1945–82) in his *Absent Duty*: the "near enemy", that is, nominally Muslim rulers presiding over un-Islamic regimes, and the "far enemy", that is, non-Muslim hostile powers such as Israel and the United States.³⁹

Ahlam's hatred seems evenly shared between the two enemies. Discursively, she devotes the bulk of her energy to the vilification of the "tyrants of unbelief" (*tawaghit al-kufr*), that is, nominally Muslim rulers whom she reproaches for "overtly professing atheism", and for using their repressive apparatus to prevent Islamic militants from opposing the far enemy by force.⁴⁰ The resulting oppression of Muslims across the world has ignited a "fire in (her) heart" which, she claims, can only be extinguished with the "blood of the tyrants".⁴¹ When she finally left Saudi Arabia for Turkey, therefore, she looked through the window of the plane and swore to herself: "I won't come back here unless as a military conqueror (*fatiha*)".⁴² In this latter quote, Ahlam does more than designating an enemy: by virtually applying to herself a title that is rarely used

39 Gilles Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 70 sq.

40 Nasr, *Akhiran rabbuna kataba*.

41 Nasr, *Al-irhab*.

42 Nasr, *Akhiran rabbuna kataba*.

in its feminine form (*fatih*, -a), she forces her way into a manly realm par excellence, that is, warfare.

Although the far enemy features less prominently in Ahlam's text, it nevertheless ranks high on her list of priorities, as illustrated by her claim that she thought about carrying out a suicide attack against a US military facility: "I found myself faced with two possibilities, not three: either heading for the land of the Caliphate, or conducting a martyrdom operation against one of the American bases located in the Gulf statelets."⁴³

In Syria, however, the enemy ISO has fought the most fiercely is neither the near nor the far one but, besides Kurdish nationalists, Arab Sunni rebels opposing the Asad regime. Although the fundamental problem for ISO is that these rebels refuse to recognise the group as the legitimate state authority, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's followers have emphasised other issues to justify their hostility to them. The first is the rebels' alleged rogue behavior, which makes civilians feel insecure in the areas they control.⁴⁴ Ahlam echoes this trope when she narrates her arrival in Syria from Turkey on board of a public microbus:

The driver was asking God that we don't be stopped at a checkpoint of the Free Army (it would more appropriately be called the "Shitty Army"),⁴⁵ or of the Saluli Front,⁴⁶ because their fighters are nervous, and they are thieves . . . As for the checkpoints of the Islamic state, there are no problems there, no tolls and no bad behaviour on the part of the fighters who man them . . . People feel secure.⁴⁷

43 Ibid. US troops withdrew from Saudi Arabia in 2003, but Washington maintains major military facilities in neighbouring countries, including a naval base in Bahrain, that is, one hour drive away from Dammam.

44 This is certainly true for many rebel factions, but ISO has an obvious interest in abusively generalising that accusation.

45 Ahlam does not actually use the adjective "shitty", but insists that the letter "h (a)" in *hurr* ("free") should be replaced with the following letter in the alphabet, that is, "kh (a)". *Khara* means "shit" in Arabic.

46 Derogatory surname for the Islamic Front, a mainstream Islamist rebel coalition that has been at war with ISO since January 2014. The epithet "Saluli" refers to Abdallah bin Ubay bin Salul, a tribal chief in Yathrib (Medina) at the time of the Prophet. Ibn Salul is remembered in the Islamic tradition as the archetypical example of a hypocrite (*munafiq*), that is, someone who insincerely embraced Islam. In ISO's propaganda, the royal Saudi family is frequently called "Al Salul" instead of "Al Sa'ud".

47 Nasr, *Akhiran rabbuna kataba*.

ISO supporters also demonise the rebels for their ties with both the near and the far enemy, that is, Western countries and regional states such as Turkey and the Gulf monarchies. Drawing from ISO's standard lexicon in that respect, Ahlam brands these groups as US "agents of the West and the Gulf tyrants" and calls them "*sahwat*,"⁴⁸ a reference to the Sunni auxiliaries known as Awakening Councils (*majalis al-sahwa*, or *sahwat*) that the US army recruited in Iraq after 2006 in order to fight ISO's predecessor, the Islamic State in Iraq.

What is more counter-intuitive than these insults is the rather secondary status of the Asad regime in al-Nasr's demonology. As said above, her text is replete with attacks against the "tyrants" of the region, but these attacks are formulated in general terms and target Gulf monarchs as much as (if not more than) the Syrian regime, that is mentioned on only three occasions in the two texts. Strikingly, although the "Muslims' suffering" in general is frequently evoked, Asad's atrocities against the Syrian population are *never* mentioned specifically, either as a motivation for Ahlam's own decision to head for Syria, or as an argument to convince her readers to follow suit. This absence is especially astonishing in a paragraph in which the young woman evokes the Muslim causes that contributed to building her political awareness. Following in this a trope of Jihadi literature since the 1980s, she provides a long list of countries where Muslims have allegedly been oppressed—"Palestine, Iraq, Lebanon, Yugoslavia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania, many African states, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh,"⁴⁹ but bizarrely fails to mention Syria.⁵⁰

This relative disinterest in the regime on the part of Ahlam is actually unsurprising since, for geographic reasons, but also because of strategic priorities on both sides, ISO and Damascus' forces have fought the rebels much more than they have fought each other.⁵¹ Moreover, ISO's agenda is not revolutionary in the classical sense, that is, bent on replacing the incumbent regime and take over the existing state structure: it rather consists in building a whole new state from scratch in the power vacuum stretching across the Syrian-Iraqi border. As a result, whereas in their rhetoric mainstream rebels focus on the evils of the

48 Ibid.

49 See the sections on Abdallah 'Azzam (by Thomas Hegghammer) and Usama bin Laden (by Omar Saghi) in Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Milelli, *Al Qaeda in its own words* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 11–146.

50 Nasr, *Al-irhab*.

51 According to IHS Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre, only 13% of the attacks carried out by ISO between 1 January and 21 November 2014 targeted regime forces. For the same period, only 6% of regime operations targeted ISO (NBC News, 11 December 2014, <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/syria-isis-have-been-ignoring-each-other-battlefield-data-suggests-n264551>).

Asad regime, ISO is chiefly concerned with highlighting the virtues of its brand new state structures.⁵² The latter is obviously more appealing than the former to Ahlam and her family, who avowedly decided to head for “jihad” only after the Caliphate was proclaimed in June 2014, that is, after three years of uprising, state repression, and civil war.

What precedes is revealing of a major difference between the Syrian war and previous examples of transnational Jihadi mobilisations: whereas foreign fighters who were traveling to Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya and Iraq (before the Syrian civil war) were motivated by the defense of oppressed coreligionists,⁵³ a non-negligible number of ISO’s foreign recruits, like Ahlam and her family, are in fact attracted by the utopian prospect of living an integrally Islamic existence unsullied by the worldly compromises they encounter elsewhere on the planet. They used to *care* about Muslim suffering around the world, but what eventually decided them to radically *change* their lifestyle and abandon the comfort of Dammam was the opportunity to live in God’s Kingdom on Earth.

Paradise Now

What Ahlam discovers after crossing the first ISO checkpoint is a view of paradise. The recent establishment of Islamic rule is not only reflected in the symbols of the new state and in demonstrations of piety, but also, as a Godly reward for submitting to His will, by the beauty of the natural setting, a prosperous economy, and military victories.

Finally, I saw the banner of the Caliphate floating high, and I saw the road signs indicating the direction of the provinces (*wilayat*).⁵⁴

I saw the building of the Traffic Directorate and the Islamic Police, the headquarters of the noble *hisba*,⁵⁵ the Office of Zakat, the Islamic Court, the Information Centres that distribute Islamic publications, the screens

52 See for instance the content of *Dabiq*, the magazine launched by ISO after the proclamation of the Caliphate.

53 The blueprint for this kind of mobilisation was set up by Abdallah ‘Azzam from 1979 onwards (see Kepel and Milelli, *Al-Qaeda in Its Own Words*, 81–146).

54 Whereas under the current regime, the largest administrative unit in Syria is called *muha-faza*, ISO has divided the territories it controls into *wilayat*.

55 Religious police in the strict sense, that is, the one concerned with vice and virtue, in addition to the supervision of market prices. The “Islamic Police” is the regular police, hence its location in the same building as the Traffic Directorate.

that display the material produced by the Caliphate . . . My God! Is that happening in the Syria that was once called "Asad's Syria"? Is this the Syria that saw the spread of unveiling, singing, music and all kind of idiocies . . . ?

The Euphrates looked limpid and fresh, calm like a venerable old man, with the zephyr blowing over it, the branches and leaves of the trees bending over it, and a clean, invigorating, cool air. The tape recorder in the bus was relentlessly playing the holy surahs of the Quran, followed by lectures calling for jihad. Life is beautiful (here) my sisters, full of Godly blessings and gifts . . . We can achieve all of this when we rule according to Islam. In the land of the Caliphate I saw (female) modesty and piety, and people who close down their shop for prayer. Likewise, I saw vibrant commerce and abundant goods, a variety of fresh vegetables, and children playing, happy and joyful, repeating enthusiastically (ISO's slogan): "The Islamic State will remain!"

Every day there are new military victories . . . unlike in the regions held by the idiotic leaders of the apostate (rebel) factions: there, every day brings failure and defeat . . .⁵⁶

Among the virtues of the new state is security, from criminals, as narrated above, but also from the police of the "tyrants", a major source of anxiety for a Jihadi blogger like Ahlam while she was living in Dammam: "no more fear of arrest and prosecution . . . For the first time I keep the wolf from the door, for the first time I am not anxious when I see the police, for the first time I invoke God for the ruler!"⁵⁷

In order to make her description relevant to a broader audience of observant Muslims, Ahlam also highlights the possibility, in ISO-controlled region, to display religious signs that are unproblematic in Saudi Arabia but not elsewhere, for instance under secular-oriented regimes and in non-Muslim majority contexts: "O supporters of the Caliphate . . . come on and freely practice Islam! Come to the place where the face-veil is not forbidden, where growing a beard does not lead to imprisonment . . ."⁵⁸ From that viewpoint, life in the Caliphate is not only secure, it is also synonymous with freedom and self-assertion, at least for those who support and contribute to ISO's project. Such a claim might seem absurd to a secular-liberal audience, but taking it into account is crucial for understanding the motivations of ISO's foreign recruits.

⁵⁶ Nasr, *Akhiran rabbuna kataba*.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

Here is perhaps the clearest illustration of the distinctly individualist break with former rationales for transnational Jihadi volunteerism: whereas previous generations of foreign fighters were deliberately choosing a life of hardship (and in Chechnya, most likely, death)⁵⁹ out of the sacred duty of helping down-trodden fellow Muslims, Ahlam makes it clear, when trying to convince her readers to head for the land of the Caliphate, that the latter offers much better possibilities of self-accomplishment than their present homeland:

Here everything you need is provided to you, thank God, life is hectic and it is characterised, above all, by peace of mind and psychological stability. I am very happy here, thank God... Come here, ask for the afterworld only, and you will get both this world and the afterworld, God willing... Try to rally (your brothers here) and you will live in this world as if you were its kings... Who said that jihad was a life of self-murder and darkness?⁶⁰

Beyond the liberties it provides to strictly observant believers, the new regime is showing virtues that Muslim used to know “only from history books”: “order and discipline, exhortation and accountability, respect for the subjects... Every (ISO fighter) is a compassionate father for the people”.⁶¹ Ahlam’s recounts several anecdotes testifying to the outstanding probity and generosity of ISO’s fighters, which she contrasts with the spread of bribery under the previous regime. In these anecdotes, Jihadis are portrayed as missionaries in arms, displaying benevolent paternalism towards submissive (and visibly fearful) local sinners like this vendor at a gas station:

ISO FIGHTER: Why do you smoke?
 VENDOR: I’m not smoking, it’s the smell of gas.
 ISO FIGHTER: I smoked for a long time when I was ignorant of Islam, so don’t lie to me.
 VENDOR: Yes, you’re right.
 ISO FIGHTER: What’s the benefit from such a sin?
 VENDOR: Nothing, my sheikh.
 ISO FIGHTER: Do you smoke in front of your children?

59 Whereas the death rate among foreign fighters in Afghanistan in the 1980s was as low as 2 to 6%, it was superior to 50% in Chechnya. Thomas Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters. Islam and the Globalisation of Jihad”, *International Security* 35 (2010/11), 63.

60 Nasr, *Akhiran rabbuna kataba*. Both underlined passages are our emphasis.

61 Ibid.

- VENDOR: Yes, my sheikh.
- ISO FIGHTER: What kind of example are you giving to them? Is that the generation that will liberate Jerusalem?
- VENDOR: No for sure.
- ISO FIGHTER: Do you see that man next to the driver? He was a rap singer for years,⁶² then he converted to Islam and became a *mujahid* (jihad fighter). Can you believe that people come from Europe to conduct jihad, whereas the Muslims in their countries are offending God by their sins?
- VENDOR: No, I can't believe this.
- ISO FIGHTER: What's the price of the gas I bought?
- VENDOR: 2400 liras.
- ISO FIGHTER: (After giving the vendor 2500 liras) I want a promise from you.
- VENDOR: That I return 100 liras to you?
- ISO FIGHTER: No, it's yours, but I want you to repent, and stop smoking today.
- VENDOR: I promise, sheikh.

More surprising is al-Nasr's minimisation of the threat constituted by the US-led air campaign that started in late September 2014: "What Coalition? What bombardment? What violence?" she asks. In her account, her new homeland does not really look like nation at war, but one where one can perish in an airstrike just like one can die elsewhere "from a car accident". It is not so much that the danger does not exist, but that genuinely faithful Muslims such as those who are building the Caliphate do simply not pay attention to it: "Life goes on... When you live an elevated Islamic life, you don't see unbelief to start with, you don't care about it."⁶³

Ahlam's first contact with the land of the Caliphate looks somewhat like a touristic visit: she made a "tour" (*jawla*) in the province of Raqqa as a honeymoon,⁶⁴ and when she entered one of the city's gun shops ("a nice little

62 This former rap singer is probably Denis Mamadou Gerhard Cuspert, alias Deso Dogg, alias Abu Talha al-Almani, a German ISO recruit with close ties to Ahlam's husband. See *Al Monitor*, 21 February 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/02/deso-dogg-germany-salafists-syria-jihad.html#ixzz3Obg9ncGL>.

63 Nasr, *Akhiran rabbuna kataba*.

64 By July 2014, ISO started to organise twice-weekly tours across its territories for just married Jihadis and civilians (*Naharnet*, 29 July 2014, <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/140865>).

terrorist shop”, as she ironically calls it), it was in order to collect fancy souvenirs as much as to equip herself: “I bought a few things . . . and I finally grasped a weapon! The people who were with me offered me a stun grenade, a dagger, a cartridge of Dushka,⁶⁵ a flag of the Caliphate, and other great things I had not even dreamt of ever possessing.”⁶⁶ As often in her account, Ahlam appears here as an over-excited teenager fixated upon the Jihadi universe the same way other girls from her generation are enamored with some pop idol.

After shopping, Ahlam was trained to the use and maintenance of what she calls her new “friend”, that is, her rifle. She details each step of the two operations at length in the text, as a proud display of her newly acquired expertise. The playful character of the shooting session places it somewhere between military training and entertainment: “The people with me told me: ‘Ahlam, imagine that you have the leaders of the infidel Coalition in front of you, then shoot.’”⁶⁷ In gruesome terms, Ahlam expresses the wish that this training will make place for actual fighting any time soon: “I ask God he grants me the chance to blow up the head of an infidel any time soon! And that I slaughter an apostate soldier.”⁶⁸

Here again, by displaying her newly acquired familiarity with military hardware, adopting a brutal rhetoric, and discursively assigning herself the role of a warrior—a widespread feature among pro-ISO female social media users,⁶⁹ Ahlam appropriates symbols that have remained essentially male ones among Islamic movements. By doing so, indeed, she goes against a pervasive tradition among jihadi groups: although as noted earlier the latter have sometimes entrusted female militants with suicide attacks, they have generally opposed their participation in conventional operations involving the use of firearms.⁷⁰ At the time of writing, however, Ahlam’s contact with the battlefield remained virtual, and her contribution to the construction of the Caliphate followed very traditional patterns of gender roles:

65 Russian-made heavy machine gun.

66 Nasr, *Akhiran rabbuna kataba*.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid.

69 In a (now deleted) Facebook post from October 2014, a female French ISO-member released a picture of firearms spread over the satin bedsheets of her room, offering to sell them at “cheap price”. Guns are also common as a profile picture for pro-ISO female users.

70 See Lahoud, “Neglected Sex”.

I was allowed to cook for the mujahidin, I was almost flying out of joy. I was literally obsessed with making sure that everything was clean and good. I started repeating: "This food will be eaten by the mujahidin; this silverware will be used by the mujahidin. I am now among the mujahidin . . . Is that real, or is it a dream?"⁷¹

Ahlam's enthusiasm towards her tasks might be sincere, but an obvious gap persists between her expectations and the reality of her participation in ISO's activities. The military training provided to her on her arrival might be a way to manage such expectations among female members, but it remains to be seen if this will prove sufficient in the long term.

Ethics and Politics of a Jihadi Marriage

The second part of Ahlam's account, *Terrorism: The Real Life*, is essentially devoted to her marriage shortly after her arrival in Raqqa. In the Islamic tradition, marriage entails a (re)assertion of authority over the bride by two male figures, that is, the bride's father and the groom. In her narration Ahlam does not reject this male authority, but she nevertheless reasserts her individual agency. Although it is justified by "security reasons", the fact that her marriage is not mentioned at all in the first text *Finally God Granted Us Forgiveness* (she only refers to a forthcoming, ground-breaking "surprise") allows her to narrate the whole process of her migration to Syria without being overshadowed by the figure of her husband: this is the story of Ahlam al-Nasr, not of Abu Usama al-Gharib's wife.

In addition to that, the marriage is presented as the culmination of a trajectory that was defined all along by Ahlam's own individual decisions. The union is concluded with the consent and in presence of Ahlam's father, but the young woman feels obliged to justify what is probably self-evident to most observant Muslim readers: "He is my legal guardian (*wali al-amr*), the one who married me."⁷² For the rest, Ahlam frames her marriage as the accomplishment of a long-standing, carefully planned personal project by claiming that she always wanted to marry a mujahid, and that short of that, she would have remained single. This is quite a bold statement in a conservative society that sees marriage as a necessary part of any woman's personal accomplishment. Not that

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Nasr, *Al-irhab*.

female celibate is exceptional in Middle Eastern societies: for reasons that will be explained below, it is even increasingly common. However, it remains experienced by most women as a shameful situation imposed by circumstances rather than as a choice. In such a context, conditioning marriage on such a restrictive criterion as the one defined by Ahlam is expectedly perceived as foolish:

Sometimes, my friends were discussing their future life... When they were asking me about my criteria (for marriage), I used to say: "my criterion is that he be a mujahidin, that's what really matters to me". They used to laugh until they realise I was serious about it: "How? That's impossible". I used to say: "First, it's what I want, it's what fundamentally suits me. Second, God is omnipotent." One of them, laughing, asked me: "What if it doesn't happen?" I replied: "Then I will never marry, because I will never allow anything to turn me away from jihad and the causes of the *umma* (global Muslim community)."

Later on, each time the travails of the Muslims increased, I became more intransigent on that condition... The number of pretenders increased, all of them with many qualities, as God was testing me, but my answer was always: "no, because he is not a mujahid".⁷³

In support of that stance, Ahlam offers a strong critique of the "backward" people who want to keep women away from the "causes of the Umma" and confine them to a purely domestic role. She recognises domestic tasks as essential female duties, but does not oppose them to political awareness: on the contrary, she claims, a household can be properly run only by a woman who harbours such awareness. In other words, Ahlam's challenge to patriarchal values pertains less to the woman's actual role in society than to her subjectivity: she must be a good housewife not out of blind imitation of tradition, but because her own personal, religious and political, convictions instruct her to be so.

Many claim that girls should care only about cooking, washing up, and sweeping! They are pleased when a girl is "smart" and runs her household efficiently and without spending much, when she does not express many demands, and refrain from making many visits outside her home, but they forget something: if she is like that, it is because of her mindset, that is, of her concern for the problems of the *umma*! If you want a girl to

73 Ibid.

be worldly-minded, then expect her to be worldly in everything, greedy, and never satisfied with anything.

The same people think they display a remarkable sense of compromise and generosity when they allow (a girl) to read books and study religion, since for them, that creature called "woman" should not study religion! I heard a lady saying that very confidently. I told myself: "She must be kidding" . . . People with such amazing mentalities say: "That a girl stays idly by during her free times is better for us than those things" (they mean being concerned with the Muslims' problems and suffering!).⁷⁴

Shortly after her arrival to Syria, Ahlam saw her marital dream fulfilled when she espoused Abu Usama al-Gharib, alias Muhammad Mahmud, whom expert Guido Steinberg called an "enormously important" figure among global Jihadi networks.⁷⁵ An Austrian citizen born in Vienna in 1985, Mahmud is the son of an Egyptian imam reported to have been a member of the militant Gamaa Islamiyya. Muhammad Mahmud spent four years in jail in Vienna for his role as the founder of the German branch of the pro-al-Qaeda Global Islamic Media Front.⁷⁶ After his release in 2011, he moved to Germany, where he established a radical outfit called Millatu Ibrahim, now banned, and became the most prominent figure on the country's Jihadi scene. By April 2012, his firebrand declarations—he vowed to "conquer Rome" in a Friday sermon—owed him to be expelled by Berlin's authorities. He subsequently headed for Egypt, then Turkey, where he was arrested in the spring of 2013. He remained in custody until August 2014, when Ankara exchanged him, along 180 other militants, for 49 Turkish hostages detained by ISO.⁷⁷ He had thus just arrived in Raqqa when he married Ahlam.

Ahlam's union with Abu Usama al-Gharib was brokered by two ISO members, a man and a woman. Interestingly, Ahlam only names the latter one, thereby further inscribing herself in a female ideological genealogy: this broker is a legendary female Jihadi figure, Fatiha Mejjati, née Hassani, alias Umm Adam, whom Ahlam grants with the title of "mother of the mujahidin and

74 Ibid.

75 *The Local* (Vienna), 5 November 2014, <http://www.thelocal.at/20141105/austrian-jihadist-poses-in-front-of-corpses>.

76 Guido Steinberg, *German Jihad: On the Internationalisation of Islamist Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 133–39.

77 *The Turkfile*, 16 October 2014, <http://www.turkfile.com/international/2014/10/16/diken-isis-militant-wanted-by-austria-also-part-of-hostage-exchange/>.

terrorists".⁷⁸ A 53-year Moroccan, she became famous as the widow of Karim Mejjati, a leading Moroccan al-Qaeda operative who was killed by the Saudi police in 2005 along with his son Adam. A strong character taking credit for sparking her late husband's religious and political awareness,⁷⁹ Umm Adam later became one of the most vocal figures on the Moroccan jihadi scene.⁸⁰ In 2014, she publicly pledged allegiance to ISO, pushed her remaining son to volunteer in the ranks of the organisation, then headed for Raqqa herself. She crossed the Turkish-Syrian border in early July 2014, a few days after the proclamation of the Caliphate.⁸¹

The marriage between Ahlam, the daughter of a respected Damascene "house of knowledge", and Abu Usama, an Austrian citizen, had considerable propaganda value for ISO, whose leadership probably instructed the brokers beforehand. ISO's Syrian rivals have regularly attacked the group for being alien due to its heavy reliance on foreign fighters. While continuing to emphasise its universal character in order to recruit even more foreign manpower,⁸² the organisation has simultaneously struggled to display symbols of its local anchorage, for instance by securing the formal allegiance of Syrian tribes.⁸³ From that perspective, Ahlam's marriage was undeniably a master stroke, as it symbolised the union of an archetypical, Western foreign fighter with a member of the Syrian urbanite upper middle-class, a social category that is generally perceived as harbouring little sympathy for ISO.

The story of Ahlam and Abu Usama's marriage in the immediate aftermath of their arrival to Raqqa, along with ISO's creation of a "Marriage Bureau" for women willing to marry its fighters,⁸⁴ also plays into ISO's recruitment strategy by demonstrating the organisation's ability to provide an appealing incentive to its members. Ahlam's once distant dream was to marry a soldier of God, but

78 Nasr, *Al-irhab*.

79 *Maroc Hebdo*, 24 April 2009, http://www.maroc-hebdo.press.ma/Site-Maroc-hebdo/archive/Archives_836/html_836/dans.html.

80 Romain Caillet, "L'influence de la guerre en Syrie sur le courant jihadiste marocain," *Religioscope. Études et analyses* 33 (2014), http://religion.info/pdf/2014_04_Caillet.pdf.

81 *Morocco World News*, 10 July 2014, <http://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2014/07/134293/moroccos-fatima-mejjati-joins-isis/>.

82 See for instance ISO's magazine *Dabiq* 1, 10, <http://media.clarionproject.org/files/09-2014/isis-isil-islamic-state-magazine-Issue-1-the-return-of-khilafah.pdf>.

83 Naser Ayed, "Jihadists and the Syrian tribes: Transient Hegemony and Chronic Dilemmas," *Arab Reform Initiative—Policy Alternatives* (2015), <http://www.arab-reform.net/sites/default/files/Jihadists%20and%20the%20Syrian%20Tribes%20Transient%20Hegemony%20and%20Chronic%20Dilemmas.pdf>.

84 *Naharnet*, 29 July 2014, <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/140865>.

according to her, marriage in itself was not a problem, as indicated by her mention of the many pretenders she rejected. Such a situation would be regarded with envy by young women who are less attractive on the marital market due to their lower social background, and might therefore face difficulties at marrying *at all*. This problem is particularly acute in Northern African countries (a major pool of ISO volunteers),⁸⁵ where women's average age at first marriage has risen considerably over the last decades.⁸⁶

Among low-income social categories in the region, family networks have been losing their ability to provide young women with marriage opportunities. Therefore, these young women are left on their own in a context where marital projects are hampered by the combination of rising unemployment with the inflation of marriage-induced financial expenses such as the dowry paid by the groom to her bride's family, the acquisition of a house, and the organisation of an ostentatious wedding celebration. All of this is explicitly criticised by Ahlam, who derides the fact that "in our society, a boy and a girl cannot start their (common) life until they gather a gigantic amount of money and throw it by the window", that is, by paying for an "enormous dowry" and "a celebration whose organisers see as the quintessence of religious observance on the mere basis that it is not mixed!"⁸⁷ Ahlam's own wedding, on the contrary, seemed particularly austere, as it was apparently limited to a registration procedure at Raqqa's Islamic court.

Another aspect of Ahlam's marriage that might look seducing to would-be volunteers of modest origin is the fact that in this union of the daughter of a wealthy and respected family with an outlaw who spent half of the past decade in jail, the traditional social order based on money and descent no longer exists. It is replaced with a new hierarchy based on ideological commitment, thereby offering prospects of a rapid social ascension regardless of one's class origin. In other words, although Ahlam's pedigree adds to ISO's prestige, she

85 Along with Saudi Arabia, Tunisia has provided the largest foreign contingent in Syria, with more than 3000 fighters by early 2015. Morocco came fourth, after Jordan, with 1500. Source: estimates by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Western governments, compiled by Radio Free Europe <http://www.rferl.org/content/infographics/infographics/26584940.html>.

86 That age ranges from 26 in Morocco (in 2004) to 31 in Libya (in 2006). This phenomenon also exists in eastern Arab states, although in a less pronounced manner. Source: Quandl (<https://www.quandl.com/c/demography/age-at-first-marriage-female-by-country>); Françoise De Bel Air, "Mariage tardif et célibat au Moyen-Orient: quels enjeux ?," in Barbara Drieskens (ed.), *Les métamorphoses du mariage au Moyen-Orient* (Beyrouth: Presses de l'IFPO, 2008), 119–50.

87 Nasr, *Al-irhab*.

simultaneously feeds into the organisation's utopian-egalitarian propaganda by marrying outside of her milieu.

Conclusion

Although it is likely that Ahlam al-Nasr would vehemently deny that she is a "feminist", her travel account features elements that are commonly associated with women's empowerment, such as a narrative overwhelmingly dominated by female heroes, an emphasis on the female narrator's ownership of the key decisions that shaped her existence, that is, jihadi migration and the choice of a husband, and an appropriation of manly military symbols. Most of this is done at the discursive level and finds little practical implications: although Ahlam threatens to break with patriarchal authority if the latter stands in the way of her jihadi vocation (by fleeing home if her parents refuse to let her go to Raqqa, or by remaining single if she cannot marry a mujahid), she does not have to do so because things eventually fall into place; as for Ahlam's aspirations to become a warrior, they have not materialised (so far) beyond basic military training.

It remains that, due to its propaganda nature, Ahlam's travel account makes its author a model for a female audience that might perceive the type of femininity she represents as genuinely revolutionary. Let us not forget here that Ahlam's familiarity with the idea of a politically conscious and active woman has its roots in the professional status of her mother thus, ultimately, in her origins in the educated upper middle-class. It would be hugely interesting, but totally out of the scope of this article, to see how Ahlam's assertion of individual autonomy resonates with female ISO members and admirers coming from lower social background where the lack of cultural capital and professional opportunities structurally hinders similar assertions of female agency.

The texts studied in this article also provide an important insight into the kind of arguments used by ISO to convince new recruits to head for the land of the Caliphate. Ahlam does not do so by stressing the duty to help suffering Syrians, but by highlighting the advantages of life under ISO's rule, namely, security, freedom to observe and impose the most uncompromising interpretation of Islam, uncomplicated marriage, and above all, the possibility to become the master of one's individual fate. Happiness, as Ahlam might have put it had she read Mao Zedong, grows out of the barrel of a gun.

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